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ABSTRACT

This position paper presents the beliefs of the California Association of Teachers of English about priorities and goals in the teaching of the English language arts. The first section of the paper describes desirable objectives and practices in teaching many aspects of language study, oral and written composing, and reading; it then examines numerous issues of concern to English teachers, including teacher responsibilities, accountability, and evaluation techniques. The second section provides a bibliography of sources that give more specific information about the topics discussed. Items are grouped according to the topical categories in the first section. (GW)

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The Teaching/Learning of English Language Arts

A CATE POSITION PAPER ON CURRICULUM ISSUES

1976/1977

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presents the current
stance of CATE about
"things that matter" in
the teaching of English
language arts

provides a statement of
beliefs and practices
about the teaching/
learning of English
language arts based on
academic research and
classroom experience

encourages dialog among
professionals at
department meetings, at
workshops and conferences,
through professional
publications

1.0 COMPONENTS OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

The discipline of English language arts encompasses not only what students do with language as they speak and write, listen and read, but also what they understand and appreciate about how language works and how literature in its broadest sense illuminates human life. It includes the study of the English language, the expression of thought through language, the effects of that expression, and the structures and forms that create the expression. Other academic disciplines associated with the study of English include speech, drama, journalism, linguistics, literature, semantics, psycholinguistics, philosophy, sociology, and psychology. English is at the center of most of these disciplines. Instruction in English language arts, involving critical thinking in all its aspects, is basic to the entire curriculum at all levels.

1.1 LANGUAGE STUDY

The age of students, their needs, their abilities, their desire to learn--all influence what components of language are studied, the degree of emphasis, and teaching procedures to be used.

The task of helping students to read and write the English language to the best of

their ability is extraordinarily complex. Certain aspects of language study should be emphasized at specific times for particular purposes.

1.1.1 Semantics

Students need to understand the role of language in human affairs including the deliberate manipulation of language for commercial and political ends, known as "doublespeak."

They need to analyze language as it is used to transmit information and to express thought and feeling. They also need to analyze language as it is used to persuade, to control, to express social cohesion. They need to learn to distinguish facts from inferences and judgments; to identify varying degrees of abstraction; to recognize the effect of connotation of words; to understand that context influences meaning; to determine the relationship of speaker, message, and audience; and to recognize commonly used propaganda techniques. The use of critical thinking skills in the study of semantics and doublespeak is an important aspect of developing responsible citizenship.

1.1.2 Mass Media

Media literacy provides students with skills for analyzing the effects of language upon themselves as listeners and viewers and as such is a necessary aspect of the English language arts.

The increasing influence of the mass media upon impressions, values, reading habits and literary tastes of students should be examined and studied at all levels. The study of television, radio, motion pictures, newspapers, and other mass media should be a part of the English language arts curriculum.

1.1.3 Word Study (Lexicography, Language History, Word Building)

Students need to study words in the context of the sentence and paragraph and through a variety of techniques.

The meanings of new words for vocabulary or spelling are more easily learned within the context of a sentence or paragraph rather than from lists. Word building, including affixing, is an effective way to teach students how language grows and changes. Effective use of dictionaries and an inquiry into language history are often procedures that follow sequentially. Students also need to learn how dictionaries are compiled, how to use them easily and efficiently, and how to find answers to the many kinds of questions dictionaries can answer.

1.1.4 Grammar

Students need to know how to use the syntactic resources of the English language in order to express ideas clearly.

Knowledge of a system of grammar can function as a support to composition, vocabulary study, and literary study. Such knowledge serves to make available the syntactic resources of the language and provides the means of implementing them within the sentence. The study of related word forms--noun, verb, adjective, and adverb--through affixing is important in vocabulary acquisition. Teachers need to know one grammar well and should know the major outlines of what each major system of grammar--traditional, structural, or transformational--attempts to convey about the structure of English.

1.1.5 Orthography/Spelling

Students need a modern spelling program, informed by modern research, diagnostic, and based on the regularities and the patterning within words and their related forms.

A viable system of teaching spelling relies upon the patterning of words rather than upon lists of random words. A modern spelling program takes into account markers and a system of the consonant alternation and vowel reduction within related word forms. Spelling may be taught in whole class settings, in small group settings, or in individual conferences. The mature reader and the confident speller have mastered the relationship of written symbol to abstract lexical spelling of words, in which letters represent segments, not sounds, within a lexical pattern.

1.1.6 Usage

All students must be given the opportunity to acquire standard English usage in order to assure their future maximum social/economic mobility.

Ease in general English ranging from the informal to the formal and the ability to write edited American English are major goals of instruction in English language arts.

1.1.7 Bilingualism and Bidialectalism

While acknowledging all students' rights to their own language, the English language arts teacher should help all students recognize the social, political, and economic values of acquiring standard American English.

The English language arts teacher should develop strategies to the extent possible to help students learn standard American English recognizing that some students may be almost a-lingual, lacking ability to use any language; some may speak little or no English; and some may speak a socioeconomic variant of English. The district and school administrators should provide extensive staff development to assist teachers to help students learn English through a number of programs, e.g., English as a second language, bilingual education, which provide the kind of oral pattern practice that helps to cue students to standard English forms.

1.1.8 Cultural Diversity

Students should understand, accept, and be knowledgeable about our pluralistic society through the content and processes of the English language arts.

The English language arts teacher should draw upon the richness and variety inherent in the English curriculum. Literature and language study, including dialectology, reflect cultural differences as well as point to our common humanity.

1.1.9 Sexism

Students need to know how to use non-sexist language forms and how word choices influence an individual's thoughts and actions.

Teachers should use and teach language forms that are positive for both sexes. English language arts teachers through language and literature study should also help students gain an understanding of sexist-oriented language as a powerful social, political, and economic force in earlier and contemporary cultures.

1.2 COMPOSING (ORAL/WRITTEN)

Students should have many opportunities to use language as an organized flow of ideas in all classroom settings.

Choosing and patterning words, sentences, and paragraphs presents more of an organization task than the act of following sequences of words, sentences, and paragraphs as in listening or reading. Translating thoughts, arranging a point of view coherently, judging the audience, and choosing an appropriate tone are challenging tasks met simultaneously much of the time by speaker or writer. Opportunities to express focused thought through small group

interaction should be a frequent occurrence in the English class. Students need many opportunities to grapple with ideas orally prior to rendering these ideas into written language.

1.2.1 Oral Language Development

Students need many opportunities to use oral language in the English language arts classroom.

Many students lack facility in expressing their ideas in spoken language. This deprivation may seriously affect these students' ability to learn. All students need multiple opportunities to verbalize their thinking through storytelling, narrating, conversing, discussing, improvising, reporting, interviewing, interpretive reading, acting, and the like. Students need to know how they are presently using the language and additional ways to extend their use of language.

1.2.2 Speaker's Voice and Audience

Students need to understand the concept of audience and voice.

They need to learn that behind the printed page and the television screen is an author whose message is shaped in part by the audience for which he/she composes. Students must find their own voices in what they compose; they also need to shape their writing and their speaking to the audiences they are addressing. Receiving feedback from peers as well as from the teacher helps students perceive how they use language. Composing for different audiences enables students to understand the importance of audience in shaping communications.

1.2.3 Composition Forms

At every academic level, students need to learn to write in a variety of forms and for a variety of audiences.

Students need to be taught writing skills for many compositional forms: personal journals, social correspondence, business correspondence, formal essays, reportorial writing, technical writing, and creative writing. Composition for other subject matter areas can furnish a common ground for conferring with other teachers concerning a school-wide program in composition as well as being a direct help to the students in improving their composing skills.

1.2.4 Composing with Non-Print Media

Students will benefit from composing with non-print media in the English language arts classroom.

Non-print media provide composing problems analogous to those found in writing, e.g., decisions as to speaker, message, audience, organization, unity, and form.

Such composing may provide understanding of the technical aspects of non-print media and may be useful in motivating students to become involved in the composing process involving written English.

1.2.5 The Conventions of Written English

Students need to learn that the conventions--punctuation, capitalization, spelling--are necessary aspects of communicating in written expression.

The conventions should be taught as needed at all academic levels. Almost all of English capitalization and much of English spelling operates systematically and can be taught according to the regular patterns inherent in the language. Much punctuation is intended to guide the reader in supplying the intonations he constantly uses as a native speaker of English and can be taught successfully as both system (supplying markers to guide meaning) and convention (e.g., the punctuation in the formal parts of a letter).

1.3 READING

Students need many opportunities to increase their skills in reading, learning to use the best possible cues (grapho-phonemic, syntactic, semantic) available to result in the clearest meaning possible.

To provide for growth in reading skill there must be continued teaching of reading at all levels. Students must become aware of the richness and subtlety of language in imaginative literature and of the clarity, force, and organizational power of language in other kinds of reading. Learning to read critically is a skill needed by most adults and should be taught at all grade levels in all content fields. Comprehension skills should be developed to deal with each specific subject field. The task of promoting reading growth is, therefore, not the task of the English language arts teacher or reading teacher alone. Achievement in reading must be the shared responsibility of all teachers in the total curriculum.

1.3.1 Value of Literature

Students at all levels should listen to and read poetry and prose, because literature represents the highest forms of language, and because it extends imagination and human understanding.

Great literature, whether poetry or prose, is an artistic experience that portrays an "image of life." Literature is concerned with actions and consequences. Through its imaginative re-enactment of life, it heightens the readers' awareness of life's possibilities. Through the resolution of conflict, it develops awareness and permits the examination of values. Literature is at the vital center of the English

language arts, for literature, as language pattern, exemplifies the most creative, most artistic uses of language; literature as vicarious experience extends human experience, human understanding, human sympathies.

1.3.2 Varieties of Literature

Students should have the opportunities to read and respond to many kinds of literature appropriate to their maturity and skill: children's literature, adolescent literature, contemporary literature and literature from the past.

All students should have the opportunity to read the literature of cultures other than their own, thereby coming to understand the conflicts, the human aspirations, the values of other cultures. They should have many opportunities to select the books they read; for when they choose, they become more responsible participants in the transaction between book and reader.

1.3.3 Varieties of Reader Responses

Developing each student's capacity to respond with increasing involvement and understanding of literature is the goal of literature programs in English language arts.

Activities in all grade levels should help students explore and expand personal responses to literature. The need for road-ranging options and individual selection of materials for classroom reading is evident. Students should be encouraged to sample various reading genre and themes. Literature that may be unsophisticated and perhaps of less merit, may be more satisfying, more personally rewarding than more complex literature. A student's response to literature must be treated authentically; superficial reactions may be gradually and adeptly expanded by appropriate classroom activities to aid the student in developing a more mature response. Frequent opportunities for small group discussions of literature should be provided.

1.3.4 Literature and Media Study

Students may study non-print media as an effective adjunct to the more traditional study of print literature.

Literature may be defined as the product of the human creative imagination as it expresses itself through language and images. Experiences through language, using the print media or non-print media (films, television, and recordings) are used both as objects for study in English language arts and, occasionally, as communication forms to be imitated.

1.3.5 Remedial Reading

Students who cannot use reading as a way of gaining information need individual

help at every level both in regular English language arts classes and/or reading skills classes designed especially for remedial readers.

Successful reading experiences can promote more positive self images. English language arts teachers need to deal with a wide range of reading abilities in every class. Teachers need to create and use special activities which will motivate students to extend reading skills and appreciations while at the same time allowing the student to have successful experiences with print.

2.0 PROFESSIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

The quality of an English language arts curriculum is influenced by numerous factors beyond the scope of the discipline itself including such societal pressures as multicultural groups in the schools; legislative demands to evaluate and test student progress, programs, and instructional materials; and financial pressures resulting in larger classes. English teachers recognize and affirm the need to serve students by providing them with a common background of basic skills in reading, composing, and communicating and an individualized education which takes into account a student's language strengths, weaknesses, and interests. The pressures and the recognized need to serve individuals combined with the complex task of teaching the English language arts demand that teachers be informed about and address all considerations affecting the profession.

2.1 Professional Organizations

Involvement in professional English organizations is essential for teachers who recognize the need for a firm grasp of significant trends in English language arts curriculum including new and successful teaching strategies.

School districts should cooperate with professional English organizations to improve the teaching of English language arts by allocating funds to send teachers to professional meetings. The knowledge and skills thus acquired by teachers will directly benefit both the students and their communities.

2.2 English Department Chair

Districts and schools should clarify the position of the English department chair by having a written job description that not only identifies the responsibilities and duties, but also clearly establishes the qualifications of the department chair as an instructional leader.

The chairperson should be an exemplary teacher, active in professional organizations, capable of providing leadership in several capacities including curriculum, morale, and inservice. The chairperson should have the support of the administration and staff and should be

provided with the time and the budget to carry out the delegated responsibilities. It is vital that the English department chairperson be selected on the basis of the above criteria so that she/he may function as a significant influence for curricular excellence.

2.3 The English Language Arts Teacher

The English language arts teacher, as a member of a department and in cooperation with peers, is responsible for identifying the instructional objectives of English courses, organizing content, selecting appropriate materials, establishing a positive learning environment, and teaching students by utilizing a variety of techniques appropriate to the situation.

English language arts teachers must communicate and interpret their needs to a variety of audiences. The teacher needs to understand the interaction between the content and processes of the English curriculum and the particular stages of language and physical/emotional growth of students. It is the English language arts teacher's responsibility to help students reach educational goals in English based upon their needs and interests.

2.4 Teacher Load/Class Size

A maximum class size of twenty-five students and four classroom contact hours per day in the secondary schools are optimal for achieving effective instruction in the English language arts.

Effective instruction in the English language arts depends on helpful interactive group life within the classroom, and positive, helpful interaction between teacher and individual student. Statements of ideas and reactions to the ideas, sharing of experiences and others' reactions to these experiences, weighing the clarity and significance of another's ideas whether oral or written, inhere in the very nature of language arts instruction. Individual student contact with the teacher regarding progress, particularly in written composition, takes teacher time in planning, in reading student compositions, and in conferring with the student. When either a helpful group life or opportunities for helpful interaction between student and teacher are diminished because of large classes, student progress is diminished thereby.

2.5 Teacher Expectations

The teacher's expectations influence the learner's perception of himself or herself, thereby affecting the learner's achievement.

The teacher should accept the student as being potentially successful, understand his or her unique needs, and structure

learning experiences built upon previous successes, utilizing all of the professional resources available for positive teacher-learner interaction.

2.6 Instructional Approaches

Instructional approaches to teaching the English language arts should be balanced to include whole class instruction, small group interaction, and individual work/study.

Whole class instruction provides opportunities to teach a lesson in common, to view a film, or to give directions. Small group interaction maximizes the opportunity for students to talk, sharing ideas and discussing written work. Individual work/study provides time to read, write, and create. A totally individualized program denies the learner social interaction and stimulation. The use of one approach to the exclusion of others is educationally unsound.

2.7 The Community

English language arts teachers must try to establish effective communication with the community about what happens in English classrooms, why what happens there is educationally valid, and how what happens is evaluated.

The more the English language arts teacher involves the community in the work of the classroom, the stronger will be the support and commitment of the community. In order to assure that parents, students and teachers will be mutually supportive of the aims of the English language arts programs in their schools, all appropriate avenues of communication should be used to transmit information to interested persons. In addition, teachers should call on citizens whose expertise may provide additional dimensions to the English language arts program to assist in instruction when appropriate.

2.8 Censorship

Potential problems of censorship are best avoided by knowing about statutes and laws governing legal authority for books used in schools and laws governing teacher dismissal, by adopting and following sensible procedures for book adoption and use, and by providing choices within each reading assignment.

Both modern learning theory and the peculiarly "captive audience" nature of the English language arts classroom call for choices in reading materials appropriate to the maturity of students. Such procedures not only facilitate the transaction between writer and reader but obviate potential problems in censorship as well. The English language arts teacher as a representative of the larger adult community must be aware of and sensitive to community mores and the

educational and cultural backgrounds of parents. English language arts teachers and administrators with the help of concerned community members should engage in a continuing dialogue concerning the experiences in the English language arts that will orient students to the real world in all its complexities rather than deny its existence.

2.9 Accountability

Responsibility for student learning in English language arts should not be the sole burden of the English language arts teacher. Students, parents, administrators, and other community members must also be charged with accountability for overall student achievement in the language arts curriculum.

A good English language arts program must be adequately funded and supported to provide for optimum student-teacher ratio dependent upon the nature of the class, sufficient personnel well-trained in the teaching of the English language arts, and sufficient supplies to provide for all students of all abilities. Teachers must be actively responsible for their own professional growth to improve teaching skills and knowledge of subject matter. School districts should provide financial support and leadership for updating and upgrading teachers' skills. No teacher should be assigned to teach the English language arts unless qualified to do so. In addition, parents, students, and administrators must share in the responsibility for student attendance, health, and positive attitudes--all variables affecting performance beyond the control of the teacher. Given cooperation from all concerned, teachers can effect significant and continuing growth in English language skills in accordance with individual student capabilities.

2.10 Assessment and Evaluation

English language arts teachers should use an array of assessment and evaluation techniques for their own professional purposes as well as to help students become more proficient in analyzing their own language performance.

Course content and instruction should be related to student needs, and evaluation measures should be selected which are appropriate for both students and content. English language arts teachers must assess both the needs of their students and the effectiveness of their instructional programs.

2.10.1 Objectives

Selecting appropriate instructional objectives to guide the learning activities for a given class is the responsibility of the teacher and his/her students working within the bounds of the goals of the department and school.

Such instructional objectives can specify what students need to do to learn. Performance objectives that define the outcomes in measurable terms and which are to be accomplished by a prescribed date are often required by federal and state statutes. Most funded programs require that outcomes be measured by objective tests that often focus on low level skill acquisition rather than concept learning or attitude changing. Objectives focused on such narrow and low level skill building limit the scope and deny the broad goals of the English language arts. Performance objectives that do not delimit, dehumanize or fragment English language arts are a beneficial adjunct to an interrelated language arts instructional program.

2.10.2 Tests (Standardized, Criterion, Domain)

English language arts teachers need to become both knowledgeable about tests and critical of the results which such measures may yield.

Standardized tests, whether survey or diagnostic, measure an individual student against a group supposedly comparable in age and educational opportunity. Such tests may offer a reference point in relation to what is considered acceptable of desired performance. However, such tests may not be valid for a specific group or an individual. The content of the standardized tests may be seriously outdated thus rendering the results invalid. Criterion referenced tests are usually more sensitive to instruction than standardized tests; however, their use may encourage teachers to fragment instruction to teach to the items on the test. Domain referenced tests offer greater promise for the English language arts program, because they are more broadly based and also sensitive to instruction and thus less prone to encourage teachers to fragment instruction.

2.10.3 Reporting and Record Keeping

Reporting of student marks or grades by English language arts teachers should be congruent with instructional methods used in the classroom and appropriate to the age of the student.

The criteria for marking should be known by the students prior to the time of the reporting period and the marks themselves should be substantiated by records. Careful record keeping is the responsibility of the teacher and requires a system for collecting information about student work, storing it and retrieving it.

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Our purpose here is to provide references of authoritative sources that give more specific information on the topics discussed. Guidelines followed in selecting references were to identify key research monographs, publications by recognized scholars, and selected articles and publications.

Our problem in compiling a bibliography coded to specific headings is that many books take up a variety of topics; therefore, the user should consult related headings. Also, many references include detailed bibliographies.

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